

LEGAL

Owner's jail term 'best memorial' for 25 lost in Albion Two sinking

Panagiotis Lemos given 15-year sentence after conviction for 'disruption of safety in sea transportation' in case filed under Greek safety legislation

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A Greek lawyer acting for the families of crew killed when the 27,000-dwt bulk carrier *Albion Two* (built 1976) sank in 1997 has hailed the conviction of owner Panagiotis Lemos as "the best memorial" for them.

London-based Lemos, 84, was found guilty in a Greek court of "disruption of safety in sea transportation" connected to maintenance of the seriously corroded ship, which went down 40 kilometres (30 miles) west of France in bad weather with the loss of all 25 people onboard.

His sentence of 15 years in jail was suspended until an appeals court hearing.

In 2003, a manslaughter trial was dropped when the widow of the Greek second officer withdrew her accusation.

But lawyer George Trantailides, who represents some of the Ukrainian victims' families, filed a case under Greek safety legislation in 2008.

He told TradeWinds the sentence was the biggest in Greek shipping history.

"This decision was the best me-

morial for 25 souls due to the great tragedy caused by Lemos," he said. Lemos, who ran London-based Panagiotis A Lemos & Associates, was not in court to hear the verdict. He is also not commenting on the case.

Trantailides says Lemos must appear before the Greek court in London every 15 days and also provide a guarantee of EUR 20,000 (\$27,000) within two months.

A civil court in Piraeus has ruled the owner is liable to pay EUR 4.9m in compensation to the families of the overseas crew but he is thought to have no assets.

Trantailides said not one euro has ever been paid.

The vessel was carrying a cargo of steel products from Antwerp, Belgium, to the Caribbean when it sank in heavy weather in February 1997, although the vessel was not reported overdue until early March 1997.

It had undergone repairs costing more than \$700,000 at Western India Shipyard in 1996 and passed an American Bureau of Shipping (ABS) enhanced survey under a port-state control inspection at Gdynia, Poland.

A surveyor's report into the sinking blamed serious corrosion problems and minimum maintenance by the owner.

"It is clearly evident from the documents produced that the *Albion Two* was affected by very serious corrosion problems," it said.

The report also noted that the ship's hull was in poor condition and that the ship's maintenance to the steel structure was inadequate.

The study was produced in proceedings before the Antwerp Commercial Court relating to the loss of the cargo.

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) said at the time: "It shows that the owner was prepared to operate a substandard vessel without the slightest concern for the safety of the seafarers onboard."

Lemos told TradeWinds after the accident: "It's tragedy in the beginning, I thought the radio was damaged, the radio operator was sick. We had a snow on the way for a long, long time, which increased the tragedy for us."

The families subsequently tried to freeze insurance payments due to Lemos.

Legal action was launched in Cyprus, Belgium and England against Onhouse Navigation — a single-ship Cypriot company which was the legal owner. It had fixed-cost liability cover from insurance company Sphere Drake.

The vessel's market value was only about \$3.5m. The cargo was insured for about \$9m but the owner could limit its liability to a maximum of \$3m.

